

1. Use a comma **after a transition word or phrase**:

One day, my mother called me with good news.
However, I wasn't home when she called.

2. Use a comma **before the eight coordinating conjunctions**
and, or, so, but, nor, yet, for, although
 if they **connect two complete sentences** with subject and verb:

He came early, **but** she came late.
 She bought a computer, **although** she didn't know how to use it.
 He was hungry, **yet** he didn't eat anything.
 I was hungry, **and** I wanted to eat right away.
 She was mad at me, **so** she refused to discuss it.
 He washed the windows, **or** he swept the floor.
 I didn't want to sing, **nor** did I want to dance.
 I was ready to leave, **for** there was nothing to do there.

Don't use a comma before coordinating conjunctions if they
don't connect two complete sentences with subject and verb:

He came early and left late.
 I was hungry and wanted to eat.
 He washed the windows or swept the floor.

3. Use a comma **after a subordinate clause that comes before a main clause**:

A subordinate clause **has a subject and verb** but is not a complete sentence.
 It adds information to another clause, the main clause. It often tells **when** or
why or **under what circumstances**:

When I'm hungry, I go to McDonald's.

(*when I'm hungry* tells **when** I go to McDonald's)

Because she's Albanian, she wants freedom from Serbia.
(*because she's Albanian* tells **why** she wants independence)

If it rains, we'll see a movie.
(*if it rains* tells **under what circumstances** we'll see a movie)

Even though I had a test the following day, I went to a movie.
(*even though I had a test...* tells **under what circumstances** I went)
A subordinate clause can go **BEFORE** or **AFTER** a main clause.
Don't use a comma if the clause comes **after** the main clause:

She wants freedom from Serbia **because she's Albanian**.

I go to McDonald's **when I'm hungry**.

We'll see a movie **if it rains**.

I went to a movie **even though I had a test the following day**.

4. Use a comma around extra information words that don't include a verb ("inserts") that could be removed from a sentence without changing or losing its basic meaning:

added description

New Hampshire, **a state with many tall mountains**, is my home.

extra identification

My father, **a good doctor**, took care of all my cousins.

added name

My son, **Rick**, is home from college but not my son, **Tom**.

added specification

Fruit, **especially apples and pears**, can help your digestion.

We played a lot of sports, **like soccer and volleyball**.

She did a lot of office jobs, **such as typing and filing**.

Many people, **including actors and politicians**, have no privacy.

NOTE: *For example* is a transition phrase, and it should be used to start a new sentence, not for an insert like those above:

We played a lot of sports. **For example**, we played volleyball every afternoon and soccer every Saturday.

added opinion

The teacher, **not a friendly man**, gave us homework every night.

Sometimes **transition words** and phrases (#2, above) **can be used as inserts**:

Her daughter likes meat. Her son, **however**, won't eat it.

She was cleaning the patio. Her brother, **in the meantime**, was in the basement making a chair.

The company lost money. His salary, **therefore**, was not going to go up any time soon.

5. Use commas **around extra information words that include a verb (“relative clauses”)** that could be removed from a sentence without changing or losing its basic meaning:

Professor Smith, **who teaches the evening class**, is on a leave of absence.
Central Park, **which was built by Olmsted**, is one of the world’s most venerated parks.

The above relative clauses are **nonrestrictive** because they **are not needed to identify** (restrict) which professor or which park you are talking about. They simply add extra information.

The following are **restrictive** relative clauses because they **are needed to identify** which kind of thing or person you are talking about. There are no commas in these cases:

We want to hire a professor **who will listen to the students**.
I'd like to visit a park **that has a zoo and a picnic area**.

Notice the difference below between A and B:

A: I have two aunts. My aunt **who lives in New Jersey** is old.

B: I have one aunt. My aunt, **who lives in New Jersey**, is old.

In A, the information about New Jersey is **NECESSARY** to identify which one of two different aunts. We call this a restrictive relative clause because it restricts (identifies) who I am talking about.

In B, the information is **EXTRA** because there is only one aunt, and it isn't necessary to identify the home state to identify who I'm talking about. There is only one aunt.

6. Use a comma to **between two elements** that come together with no word separating them:

Rules for Using Commas

Use a comma between city, state (or country)

I come from **Kokomo, Indiana**. He's from **Cali, Colombia**.

Use a comma between date (or month), year

I came to the US in **May, 1989**. He was born on **June 10, 1934**.

7. Use a comma to **between items in a list**.

You may put a comma before *and* at the end of the list. [It's not required, but many publishers do it when they feel it is useful for clarity.]

I like **bananas, pears, apples[,] and peaches**.

Lists must always have a final *and*, even if the list has only two items:

BAD: *I love fruit, like apples, peaches.

GOOD: I love fruit, like apples **and** peaches.

Rules for Using Commas

Exercise: Tell which rule (1-7) is responsible for the comma:

- ___ 1. I have a generous aunt, who sends me money regularly.
- ___ 2. My uncle, a jolly fellow, gives good advice.
- ___ 3. Fortunately, my car was insured.
- ___ 4. He gave a sigh of relief, and he picked up the package.
- ___ 5. He comes from Paris, France.
- ___ 6. You should visit London, Paris, Rome and Belgrade.
- ___ 7. When you get to New York, you should visit me.
- ___ 8. San Francisco, the most beautiful city in the US, is where my brother lives.
- ___ 9. We entered the war on December 7, 1941.
- ___ 10. We took him to court, which turned out to be the worst decision we had ever made.
- ___ 11. Because you are only 18, you can't buy a drink with us.
- ___ 12. Once in a while, I have a beer with dinner.
- ___ 13. The camp offers swimming, camping, water skiing and tennis.
- ___ 14. He called her every morning, but she never came to the phone.

(Now put in *all necessary commas* and in each case put **TWO rules** that inspired your decision.)

Rules for Using Commas

- _____ 15. One day I told her that she was losing her mind but she paid no attention to me.
- _____ 16. If you see her tell her that I need paper clips pens pencils and White Out.
- _____ 17. My neighbor an annoying old man always complains when I play loud music after 9 PM but I don't pay any attention to him.
- _____ 18. She comes from Belgrade Yugoslavia so she speaks Serbo-Croatian.
- _____ 19. Before she has lunch she usually cleans the kitchen and yesterday was no exception.
- _____ 20. My teacher who always has a smile on her face started working here in May 1998.